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BANGKOK FOR RMO, CDC, USAID/RDM/A (MFRIEDMAN)  
USDA FOR FAS/PASS TO APHIS  
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR OSD/ISA/AP (LSTERN)  
HOMELAND SECURITY COUNCIL FOR RVENKAYYA  
NSC FOR FSHIRZAD AND JMELINE  
USAID FOR ANE AND GH (DCAROLL, SCLEMENTS AND PCHAPLIN)  
STATE PASS USTR (ELENA BRYAN)  
STATE ALSO PASS HHS/OGHA (WSTEIGER AND EELVANDER)  
ROME FOR FAO  
USMISSION GENEVA FOR HEALTH ATTACHE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL CASC EAGR PINR SOCI PGOV VM AFLU

SUBJECT: HHS SECRETARY LEAVITT'S MEETING WITH THE VIETNAMESE  
MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Michael Leavitt met with Vietnamese Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) Cao Duc Phat on October 14 to discuss avian influenza (AI) issues and ways to improve U.S.-Vietnam cooperation to combat AI more effectively. Minister Phat described Vietnam's experience with AI and the efforts the GVN is undertaking to prevent its spread to humans, including advising farmers and local governments on better ways to raise and transport poultry. Both the Secretary and the Minister agreed on the importance of good and fast science in addressing AI, and the Minister requested the assistance of the United States and other international partners in helping to build up Vietnam's laboratory, research and animal medical capacities, and vaccine-production capabilities. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt met October 14 with Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Cao Duc Phat (full participants lists in paragraph 16). Welcoming the Secretary, Minister Phat underscored his Government's hope that the United States will join Vietnam in its effort to combat avian influenza (AI), and added that the Secretary's presence is evidence of strong U.S. support. Commenting on Vietnam's indelible ties to agriculture and agricultural life, the Secretary expressed his understanding of why and how Vietnam is going to great lengths to take on AI. During this visit, the Secretary's delegation hoped to understand more completely

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the connection between agriculture and human influenza, which will affect the USG's own preparations, the Secretary said. The United States is very concerned about AI and wants to cooperate with the global community to ensure that, as we deal with this problem, the interests of those who raise livestock are looked after as much as possible, he continued.

¶3. (SBU) At the invitation of the Secretary, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Deputy Under Secretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services James Butler noted he had modified his schedule in Vietnam to allow him to spend more time with MARD counterparts to learn more about what the GVN is doing in response to AI. Vietnam is undertaking a unique program to vaccinate its poultry, and through further discussions and visits we hope to understand better the GVN's unmet needs. The United States and other international partners could be in a position to provide human and financial resources to allow Vietnam to succeed in this program, Deputy U/S Butler said.

¶4. (SBU) Turning to an overview of AI in Vietnam and the GVN's efforts to respond, Minister Phat said that AI first occurred in Vietnam in late 2003 and was detected in 57 of 64 provinces by spring 2004. The disease both threatened people's health and adversely impacted Vietnam's economic development. From early on, the GVN recognized the seriousness of AI and resolved to do everything in its power to protect the health of Vietnam's citizens. Today, the GVN continues to mobilize every means at its disposal to stop an AI epidemic from occurring, with the paramount goal of protecting human health. The GVN's understanding is that only by controlling a poultry epidemic will human health be protected.

¶5. (SBU) Since 2004, the GVN has implemented many programs, such as isolating outbreak areas and culling 45 million out

of Vietnam's 250 million poultry, the Minister continued. The GVN also halted the movement of poultry between areas and instructed people to disinfect affected areas and farm units. The GVN has also undertaken awareness campaigns to ensure people know AI's dangers and the importance of protecting their poultry flocks and their own health. In 2004, AI seriously damaged Vietnam's economic development, costing 0.5 percent in GDP growth and killed 24 people.

16. (SBU) By the end of March 2004, AI's spread had stopped, but there were subsequent waves in July, August, October and November, Minister Phat said. The peak of the epidemic was in December 2004 and January 2005. At that time, the GVN spared nothing to control the epidemic and, thanks to prior experience and stronger efforts, the epidemic was better controlled than before. Therefore, only 1.5 million (versus 45 million) poultry had to be culled. From spring 2005, the number of outbreaks has declined by about 60 percent, and, since August 24, there have been no AI-related deaths in Vietnam. But the problem remains complicated: a large number of waterfowl, ducks and chickens carry the virus, but have no clinical symptoms. In fact, the GVN found that 70 percent of the waterfowl in the Mekong Delta region had AI positive serotests. Similarly, 1.5 percent of all chickens had positive serotests. Further complicating things is the fact that many ducks and chicken that carry the virus no longer die.

17. (SBU) As a result of these new difficulties, the GVN further strengthened its resolve to fight AI on every front simultaneously, Minister Phat stressed. One major effort is the GVN's information program. A lesson learned over the past two years is that the most effective way to tackle AI is to increase awareness among members of the public about how to protect themselves while raising poultry. A second effort is to instruct farmers to regularly disinfect farming areas. A third is to undertake a vaccination program for all bird flocks by using Chinese-made H5N1 and H5N2 vaccines, and the GVN has budgeted USD 40 million for this effort over two years. To date, 50 million poultry have been vaccinated, but 100 million remain, and the second round of vaccinations is to take place in November. (Note: Not all poultry will be vaccinated. End Note.) (COMMENT: While Minister Phat projects confidence and competence, and appears to be by far the Vietnamese Government official most well-versed in the avian influenza situation, the experts from the agricultural sector on the delegation still harbored doubts about the Vietnamese vaccination campaign. USDA would like to have samples of the Chinese-made vaccine to test it for efficacy. END COMMENT.)

18. (SBU) But, as the GVN explains to farmers, vaccinations are merely part of the equation, and other measures are necessary, such as refraining from expanding waterfowl cultivation and avoiding raising poultry in open areas, the Minister continued. The GVN is also advising farmers to change the way they raise poultry, turning from raising them in their backyards to commercial farm production. The Government also advised localities to reorganize their system of transporting, slaughtering and processing poultry. In Vietnamese urban areas, particularly in the north, people prefer to buy and slaughter chickens themselves. Now, the GVN says that that should not be done. In response to the Secretary's question about enforcement mechanisms, the

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Minister said that, at this point, the GVN can only advise what and what not to practice. But it is difficult, because 65 percent of all households in Vietnam have poultry in their backyards, the Minister acknowledged.

19. (SBU) Another problem Vietnam faces is the weakness of its animal health system, he continued. There are a shortage of veterinary staff at the local level and a lack of laboratories to monitor AI and test samples. Labs in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are thus forced to work day and night. Vietnam also lacks experts to monitor changes in the AI virus, particularly at the genetic level. While Vietnam very much appreciates the assistance of the labs at the HHS Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the time it takes to exchange samples and information is too long. If possible, it would be useful for the United States to send its experts to Vietnam to help to monitor the disease, the Minister suggested. The Secretary noted that this subject, and the broader issue of how we can help Vietnam to increase its animal health lab capacity, would be worth further discussions between MARD and USDA during this visit.

10. (SBU) It is extremely important for Vietnam to identify AI and how it is mutating as soon as possible and deal with it as promptly as possible, the Minister stressed. The Secretary agreed, noting that it appears that the United

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States and Vietnam are in unison on the need for good, fast and well-planned science. The GVN has approved an action

plan, which will be transmitted to local governments next week, the Minister said.

¶11. (SBU) At the Secretary's invitation, the HHS/CDC Director Dr. Julie Gerberding asked what Vietnam's advice would be for the United States for preventing infection of domestic birds by migratory birds, particularly as there are many people who hunt and could be thus exposed. The Minister said that Vietnam is also a victim of migratory birds, but Vietnam's lesson is about the importance of close monitoring and supervision and identifying an outbreak as swiftly as possible.

¶12. (SBU) HHS/National Institutes of Health National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Disease Director Dr. Anthony Fauci noted that one problem with preemptive vaccinations is that some AI strains continue to evolve and there are multiple bird flu strains still circulating. In response to his question about how the GVN is addressing this, the Minister said that the GVN is aware of this issue, "but we have to make a choice." One part of Vietnam's action plan is post-vaccination monitoring of poultry, but this is a great challenge, he admitted.

¶13. (SBU) Dr. Alex Thiermann of the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) thanked the GVN and MARD for their transparency and efforts, but noted that, while the vaccination efforts seem to have been the right choice and are a model for the region, they are only a temporary tool that cannot be used permanently. The OIE will continue to support Vietnam in its efforts, he said. The Minister responded by asking for continued international support for increasing Vietnam's research capacity and vaccine production capacity. This is not a question of economics, but a necessity because, as the virus changes, Vietnam will need to respond quickly.

¶14. (SBU) Dr. Changchui He of the Food and Agriculture Organization noted that, in pre-pandemic times, the agricultural sector can play a role in reducing the risk to the human population. In this regard, it is critical for Vietnam to adopt with its partners a comprehensive strategy, including surveillance and vaccinations. Furthermore, Vietnam's own interagency coordination will remain vitally important, he said.

¶15. (SBU) Concluding, Ambassador Marine raised the question of Vietnam's national preparation plan and asked whether the GVN intends to exercise or test it. The Minister responded that there are different scenarios under the plan, which are based on the World Health Organization's phases three, four, five and six of an AI outbreak. For example, the scenarios for phases five and six deal with either AI's entering Vietnam from abroad or being homegrown. Based these varying scenarios, Vietnam has three response models, and the GVN will try to work out what it will do to both protect human health and deal with poultry, and how various Government elements should coordinate.

¶16. (U) Participants lists:

United States

Secretary Leavitt

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Ambassador Marine  
Under Secretary Paula Dobriansky  
James Butler, Deputy Under Secretary, USDA  
Kent Hill, Acting Assistant Administrator, USAID  
Julie Gerberding, HHS/CDC Director  
Anthony Fauci, HHS/NIH/NIAID Director  
Margaret Chan, WHO  
Changchui He, FAO  
Alexander Thierman, OIE  
William Steiger, HHS Special Assistant for International Affairs  
Suzy DeFrancis, HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs

Vietnam

Minister Phat  
Le Van Minh, DG, International Cooperation Department  
Tran Trong Hai, Deputy Director, International Cooperation, Ministry of Health  
Nguyen Quang Minh, DG, Ministerial Administration Office  
Nguyen Thi Tuyet Hoa, DDG, International Cooperation Department  
La Van Bam, DDG, Department of Science and Technology  
Hoang Van Nam, DDG, Department of Animal Health  
To Long Thanh, Deputy Director, National Center of Veterinary Diagnostics  
Tran Ngoc Thang, Head of International Cooperation, Department of Animal Health

Nguyen Thi Thu Thuy, Expert, Department of Animal Health  
Nguyen Dang Vang, Director, Institute of Animal Husbandry  
Truong Van Dzung, Director, Institute of Veterinary Research  
Institute  
Nguyen Ngoc Nhien, Deputy Director, Institute of Veterinary  
Research Institute  
Nguyen Tien Dzung, Head of Virology Department, Institute of  
Veterinary Research Institute  
Nguyen Thanh Son, Division Head, Agricultural Department  
Le Minh Linh, Expert, National Center of Agricultural  
Extension  
Hoang Ngoc Bao, Senior Expert, International Cooperation  
Department

¶17. (U) Secretary Leavitt's party cleared this message.

MARINEBOARDMAN